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Standard View



1913–1938 Indian Head 5-Cent Coins

Reverse - Buffalo

The popular Indian Head, or Buffalo, five-cent coin (nickel) was introduced in 1913. Designed by James Earle Fraser, a student of legendary sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the Indian Head/Buffalo nickel design showcases the native beauty of the American West.

The Native American depiction on the coins obverse is believed to be based on three different American Indians. Two of the American Indians who modeled for Fraser as he sculpted the coin were named by the designer before his death. They were Chief Iron Tail of the Lakota Sioux and Chief Two Moons of the Cheyenne. Although many have claimed to have had a sitting with Fraser for this design, he could not recall the name of the third person, and satisfactory documentation has not yet been found to identify that individual. It is widely believed that the bison on the coin's reverse was modeled after Black Diamond, a popular attraction at the New York Zoological Gardens.

In the first year of the coin's issue, 1913, there were two distinct varieties, the first showing the bison on a mound (pictured above) and the second with the base redesigned to a thinner, straight line. Matte proof coins were struck and made available to collectors from 1913 to 1916. The designer's initial, the letter 'F,' appears on the obverse below the date.

The coins are also quite accessible to the average collector as many fine examples covering a variety of dates are available. In total, more than 1.2 billion were struck between 1913 and 1938. Buffalo nickels are also regarded as good luck pieces by some and seem to engender a sense of nostalgia for others.

The United States Mint revived the popular design in 2001 with the release of the American Buffalo Commemorative Coin.

James Earle Fraser was born November 4, 1876, in Winona, Minnesota. He studied art at the Art Institute of Chicago, and at the Academie Julian and Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. Completed before he was 17 years old in 1894 and considered one of the best-known art pieces in America, Fraser's sculpture entitled "End of the Trail," won the \$1,000 award of the American Art Association in Paris. One member of the association's jury, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the designer of the \$10 and \$20 eagle and double eagle coins in 1907, later asked Fraser to become his assistant.

Some of Fraser's other noted works include statues of Thomas Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (State Capitol Building, Jefferson City, Mo.), Alexander Hamilton (United States Treasury Building, Washington, D.C.) and a seated Thomas Edison (Edison Institute, Dearborn, Mich.).

